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Leader Self Disclosure Within PAL: A case study

Adelaide Allen and Sue Court

INTRODUCTION

Peer Assisted Learning (PAL) is a variant of the Supplemental Instruction programme, developed in the United States (Rust and Wallace, 1994); currently over twenty UK universities employ PAL as a support mechanism for new cohorts each year. The growth in popularity of Peer Assisted Learning is undoubtedly linked to potential benefits, such as reduced drop-out rates, opportunities to increase academic performance (Packman and Miller, 2000) and an improved first year experience.

At Bournemouth University PAL was adopted on a range of courses in 2002. Second year students are trained centrally to lead groups of up to twenty first year students in regular sessions. Capstick, Fleming and Hurne (2004) reported that 59% of Bournemouth University students found that the scheme helped them adjust to and understand university culture. They also concluded that the first year students profited from their PAL Leaders' first hand experience. Yet we have a limited understanding of the dynamics of the interaction between our Leaders and students.

The role of PAL Leaders is to act as facilitators of learning (Rust and Wallace, 1994), helping students to develop an understanding of university culture and transferable learning skills. Ashwin (1994 cited in Rust and Wallace, 1994) stated that in order to run a beneficial session 'Leaders must get the first year students involved' (Ashwin 1994 cited in Rust and Wallace, 1994, p. 88); they should foster a friendly and supportive spirit, allowing students to disclose their experiences, worries and apprehensions. Consequently, it is crucial that PAL Leaders are able to build relationships with

their students (Stout and McDaniel, 2006) to develop an open and trusting climate. In turn, Leader self disclosure may ensure that students profit from their PAL sessions (Capstick et al., 2004). Our aim is to gain insight into Leaders' use of self disclosure in their sessions in order to guide our training for PAL in the future.

Self Disclosure Within Education

Self disclosure is “the act of making yourself manifest, showing yourself so others can perceive you” (Jourard, 1971, p. 19). It is arguably “the main feature that stabilises, establishes and develops relationships of all types” (Forgas, 1985, p. 10) and is evident across various situations.

Literature on self disclosure is abundant (Andersen and Guerrero, 1998) with thousands of quantitative studies stretching back over forty years (Hargie, 1997). It is understood that self disclosures can differ; they can be “positive or negative, frequent or infrequent, long or short, accurate or inaccurate reflections” (Knapp and Vangelisti, 1996, p. 88). Yet it seems that there are no investigations which establish how self disclosures might vary within specific situations, such as a PAL session, although self disclosure has been explored in educational settings in general.

Whether disclosure should take place at all between teachers and students is a key consideration. Research suggests that disclosure should flow from ‘low status to high status individuals but not vice versa’ (Hargie, Saunders and Dickson, 1994, p. 225), indicating that teacher disclosure is inappropriate. Yet self disclosure is “a rich source of student-teacher communication” (Fusani, 1994, p. 249) which has an important part to play in building student-teacher relationships and producing positive effects (Downs, Javidi and Nussbaum, 1988).

Sorenson (1989) defines teacher self disclosure as “the teacher’s statements in the classroom about self that may or not may not be related to subject content” (p. 2). Through the use of self disclosure teachers can move away from formal constraints to develop interpersonal relationships which generate respect and trust. This can result in the creation of

a safe environment where learning is optimal (Frymier and Houser, 2000).

Furthermore teachers use self disclosure as a form of reinforcement (Hargie et al., 1994). Through sharing experiences, the students learn more about their instructors as people, which creates a more positive image, suggesting the instructor is approachable and likeable (Cayanus and Martin, 2002). Although this may seem a self-centred reason to disclose, studies have demonstrated that students work more efficiently and retain more from favoured instructors (Scot and McCroskey, 1987 cited in Sorenson, 1989).

Further findings from studies conducted in the classroom suggest that PAL Leader disclosure of personal information may encourage a more informal, relaxed environment, resulting in a more productive session. Hendrick (1988) confirmed that facilitator disclosure is needed to provide a supportive atmosphere; this was echoed by Cayanus (2004) who stressed that instructor self disclosure can help students participate, increase the quality of class discussions and improve the clarity of the information presented (Downs et al., 1988; Wambach and Brothen, 1997). Furthermore, appropriate sharing can help motivate students and provide a richer learning environment (McBride and Wahl, 2005), all of which are beneficial for a peer support scheme.

Self Disclosure within PAL

Self disclosure within teaching clearly helps to create a safe, supportive environment (Anatki, Barnes and Leudar, 2005), leading to an atmosphere in which students are likely to feel comfortable turning to instructors for guidance (Wooten and McCroskey, 1996). Similarly these qualities are crucial within a PAL context as Leaders act as facilitators, providing support and assistance for first year students (Ashwin, 2003).

To succeed in their role, Donelan and Kay (1998) stress that PAL Leaders must “aid social interaction which enhances students’ belonging and learning” (p. 296). Despite this comment there appears to be insufficient literature to indicate how Leaders should achieve this within a session.

Self disclosure is defined as “any message about the self that a person communicates to another” (Wheeless, 1976, *p.* 47), so includes any personal experiences revealed by Leaders within a PAL context. As the opportunity to learn from and discuss personal experiences is valued highly within the PAL scheme (Donelan and Kay, 1998), it is essential that PAL Leaders understand the potential and power of self disclosure. Goldstein and Benassi (1994) suggest that Leaders may self disclose in order to provide insight, encourage sharing, create a safe atmosphere and begin to develop a feeling of mutual trust and respect. However, the level and nature of the self disclosure could be critical, and therefore requires further investigation.

Earlier research into Peer Assisted Learning has focused on practical issues and benefits of the scheme (Sobral, 2002; Packham and Miller, 2000; Rust and Wallace, 1994), rather than the behaviour of the Leader within a session. Yet by studying the behaviour and interaction in sessions, insight could be gained to provide a greater understanding of relationship building within the PAL context.

Appropriateness of Self Disclosure

An issue, which is perceived as a serious concern within all instructor self disclosure research, is the appropriateness of its content (Mathews, Derlega and Morrow, 2006). Clearly, individuals can make choices about the content of their disclosures (Mathews et al., 2006). However, Hargie et al., (1994) note that many people rely on making disclosures about predictable topics such as the weather, sport and public issues, to avoid arousing strong emotions and risk revealing more personal information, such as beliefs and values.

It is argued that for disclosures to be beneficial they must be appropriate, perceived as honest, positive and intentional (Lannuttie and Strauman, 2006). If these criteria are not fulfilled, instructor disclosure can be detrimental to the learning environment and to any relationship building (Cyanus and Martin 2002). The harmful effects include generating an uncomfortable classroom climate and reducing levels of credibility (Mazer, 2007; Cain, 1996). These findings suggest that it is important to understand what is and, in

particular, what is not appropriate within a PAL setting in order to avoid any negative outcomes.

It has been argued that the content of their disclosure must be a key consideration for PAL Leaders (Rust and Wallace, 1994), as certain topics may be inappropriate because of the nature of their role. Jourard (1971, cited in Cozby, 1973) suggested that a clear hierarchy of 'disclosability' exists. Predictable topics are readily disclosed whereas other topics such as financial and family matters are not usually disclosed unless the relationship is highly intimate (Forgas, 1985). Derlega, Metts, Petronio and Margulis, (1993) suggest that people often have two competing needs that must be balanced when disclosing; the need to share personal information and the need to preserve a sense of privacy. This is perhaps more pertinent for teachers within an educational context, as they need to maintain an air of authority. Nevertheless, this should also be a consideration of a PAL Leader, as they are likely to seek the respect of their peers (Ashwin, 1994, cited in Rust and Wallace, 1994).

Summary

A key element of the definition of PAL is that "Leaders do not teach and have no specific knowledge to impart" (Capstick and Fleming, 2002, p. 1). This emphasises the distinction between teaching and the facilitator role of PAL Leaders. Therefore, we need to consider whether the findings from existing educational research apply in a PAL setting or whether there are notable differences. For example, levels of disclosure in PAL may relate to the different relationship between Leaders and their students. As peers, it is likely that the disclosure boundaries may be more relaxed, leading to the sharing of personal experiences (McBride and Wahl, 2005). On the other hand, the main reported reason behind teacher disclosure is the need to provide examples based on personal experience (Cyanus and Martin, 2002). This motive is lacking in the non-learning context of PAL and suggests that, as Leaders do not impart knowledge, disclosure may be less desirable.

Nevertheless, the rationale for PAL Leaders' to engage in self disclosure is strong. Donelan and Kay (1998) comment that the development of trust through reciprocity is the key focus

of the preliminary sessions of PAL. This links directly to previous findings which demonstrated the need for teacher disclosure to achieve a high level of reciprocity (Fisher and Adams, 1994). Previous research suggests that Leaders do self disclose throughout a session (Capstick et al., 2004; Ashwin, 2003), due to the nature of the scheme, which encourages students to share their experiences. However, current research has not revealed the precise content and volume of PAL Leader disclosure. This clearly requires analysis, so that the appropriateness of these disclosures can be evaluated in order to ensure relevant training for our Leaders.

It is clear from the literature that there are many studies which address self disclosure as a form of instructor communication (Derlega et al., 1993; Hargie et al, 1994; Cayanus and Martin, 2002, 2004). Yet the majority of PAL research fails to focus on PAL Leader behaviour and instead simply examines the uses of the scheme (Packman and Miller, 2000; Capstick et al., 2004). By investigating PAL Leader disclosure content and the factors which influence a PAL Leader's choice to self disclose, knowledge in this area would be extended and training could be developed to enrich our Leaders' skills.

METHOD

Qualitative and quantitative methods were used to gain insight from practising PAL Leaders at Bournemouth University about the levels and nature of their self disclosure within sessions.

A variety of methods have been employed in previous self disclosure studies. Examples of these methods include coding lecture tapes (Downs, Javidi and Nussbaum, 1988), comparing current instructors' evaluations to past instructors' evaluations (Goldstein and Benassi, 1994) and reading instructor narratives (Ebersole, McFall and Brandt, 1977 cited in Cayanus and Martin, 2002). However, within this study an adaptation of Cayanus and Martin's (2002) Instructor Self Disclosure Scale (ISDS) was developed into a structured questionnaire and distributed to a population of

87 PAL Leaders across a range of vocational courses. Consequently, this questionnaire recorded the content of PAL Leader self disclosure for the sample of 52, via a self reporting method.

Flexible, semi-structured face-to-face interviews were also carried out to provide clarification and elaboration of the findings from the quantitative questionnaire. Four interviews with two respondents were carried out to obtain a deeper understanding of the disclosing behaviour of our Leaders within PAL sessions.

SELF DISCLOSURE WITHIN PAL

Our research focused on three main themes. Firstly we discuss the purposes of using self disclosure reported by our Leaders in their PAL sessions, in relation to the type of topics disclosed. Secondly, we report on their consideration of the appropriateness of certain topics and, finally, the way they negotiate the boundary between themselves and the first year students.

Purposes of using self disclosure

According to our findings, PAL Leaders at our institution do self disclose, as only a quarter of the respondents (26%) reported that they rarely talk about themselves during sessions. In fact, our quantitative results show that 46% of Leaders are open with their feelings and 84% often use personal examples within a session. Evidently, our first year students are profiting from the experiences of a second year Leader (Capstick et al., 2004). However, we wanted to explore the purposes that Leaders identified for self disclosing and whether these were similar to those reported by tutors.

The development of trust was a key reason for self disclosing, as Emily* identified:

“It [self disclosure] makes them [PAL students] build trust in you. You’re not just standing there telling them what to do or specific facts like a lecturer does, it makes you appear more human, to me that’s really important”

In fact Emily uses self disclosure strategically, as her comments in the follow-up interview reveal:

“I guess I try and find things to talk about so I can develop trust with the group and so they realise that I am on their level and perhaps not as distant as a lecturer may be. I think the common ground element enables me to build my relationships with my students”

Trust was revealed as a major component within relationship development, as Lucy* explained:

“I think if trust is there, people engage more. I think if my students trust me then perhaps they are more likely to attend my sessions ... trust had to be built for the sharing of experiences to be beneficial”

These observations support the claim that self disclosures can foster a friendly and supportive spirit and help “get students involved” (Ashwin, 1994, cited in Rust and Wallace 1994, p. 88) and in turn appear to “aid social interaction which enhances students’ belonging and learning” (Donelan and Kay, 1998, p. 296). Similarly, our findings agree with Goldstein and Benassi (1994) who suggest that self disclosure promotes a secure climate and a feeling of shared trust. This demonstrates that Anatki’s (2005) idea that a supportive environment can be created by self disclosure is just as likely to occur in a PAL session as it is in the classroom.

Clearly, Leaders recognise that creating a supportive environment is vital in building strong relationships with their students, which Stout and McDaniel (2006) suggest is a key aspect of PAL sessions. This demonstrates the Leaders’ understanding of the potential uses of self disclosure as well as the similarities between PAL Leader behaviour and that of teachers, who both seem to use this type of interaction as a form of reinforcement (Hargie et al., 1994).

Furthermore, Frymier and Houser (2000) reported a safe environment is conducive to learning in the classroom and students are more likely to ask for help (Wooten and McCroskey, 1996). Yet Leaders are not teachers; their role is to facilitate. But perhaps there is potential for learning in PAL

sessions about experiences rather than course material. Emily self discloses:

“to show that we’ve experienced the same things they are going through, and for them to learn from our mistakes and realise that if they are worried about something they don’t have to suffer alone and usually it is a common problem”.

As 58% of Leaders reported that they discussed issues beyond the course related material we wanted to clarify why other areas were included. Emily provided some indication:

“Probably university issues, like accommodation and other aspects of university life. It’s not just the course that is important. It’s about university in general”

Donelan and Kay (1998) emphasised the importance of students learning from personal experience in PAL sessions. Clearly, when the topic is student life, Leaders draw on their own experiences; 84% of the survey respondents reported they used personal examples. Lucy reflected:

“We talked a lot about the second year and I felt the best way to explain how the course changes across the years would be to talk about myself ... I guess I wanted to seem a bit more human and I had no idea how else to talk about the second year, if not through personal examples”

Cayanus and Martin (2002) indicated that the central motivation for personal self disclosures in the classroom is to illustrate learning. Here we see the same use of self disclosure but, in the absence of subject material to teach, Leaders offer learning about their experiences.

Not only do examples relate to the Leaders themselves, but 56% of respondents said they use their friends and family as examples within the PAL sessions. Lucy provided an explanation for this:

“if I use my friends as examples to prove that people do fail etc, then I think these examples have more weight than if a lecturer was to say it”

Lucy clearly believes that providing examples of her own experiences, and those of her peers, brings credibility and validity to her role which allows her to connect with the students in a way that tutors cannot. Therefore it is university experiences, whether the Leaders' own or their friends' which provide learning examples in the PAL sessions, in the same way that teachers use self disclosures in the classroom (Cyanus and Martin, 2002).

Nevertheless, a main purpose of PAL is to encourage discussion between students. As Lucy reflected:

"Most of the time I choose to facilitate group discussion about topics, rather than me always talking, I think the students get more out of the session this way."

Cyanus (2004) reported that self disclosure encourages students to contribute to class discussions, thereby improving the quality of the interaction amongst the class members. Therefore, it could be argued that self disclosure by the Leaders is an important step in the process of developing the facilitator role. In addition, this provides further evidence of the similarity between PAL Leader and instructor interaction, as in both cases self disclosure could increase the quality of class discussions (Downs et al., 1988; Wambach and Brothen, 1997).

Another potential function of self disclosure may be to create rapport. Emily remarks upon the fact that both she and the group are students:

"The one thing I can rely upon is that as a student I am likely to have things in common with them."

It is likely that this shared experience will result in Leaders being perceived as approachable and likeable by their students, as Cyanus and Martin (2002) discovered in their research in the classroom. Popularity is certainly an issue that should not be overlooked as preferred teachers have been shown to increase efficiency and retention of students (Scot and McCrosky, 1987 cited in Sorenson, 1989).

Our findings suggest that self disclosure is used by our PAL Leaders for specific purposes, namely, to generate trust, develop a positive climate, illustrate issues they cover in sessions and present a positive image of themselves.

Appropriateness of self disclosure

Lannuttie and Strauman (2006) stress that, in order to be helpful, disclosures must be appropriate. Inappropriate disclosures have been found to negatively impact learning and relationship development (Cayanus and Martin (2002), as well as producing an uncomfortable climate and reducing trust (Mazer, 2007; Cain, 1996). Consequently, it is not surprising that the appropriateness of their disclosure was a key consideration for the two interviewees:

“PAL is in place to help the students with university issues and it is my responsibility to discuss things appropriate to the nature of the scheme.” (Lucy)

Seventy-four per cent of the Leaders in our sample reported that they would be likely to talk about themselves, but, as Lucy acknowledged, the appropriateness of the disclosure is a critical factor. When asked what she felt was inappropriate, Lucy explained:

“I think that anything which does not relate in some way to the course and my experiences should not be discussed. I will tell my close friends about my emotions and problems but I don’t have a long term relationship with my PAL students.”

Emily echoed that thought, stressing that she felt disclosures “must be safe” and a Leader should find a “common ground” with the students. When asked to explain these terms she replied:

“I choose to talk about issues which I feel won’t offend anyone, issues which are accessible to everyone in the group.”

This supports Rust and Wallace’s (1994) suggestion that the content of instructor disclosure is a major concern. Emily undoubtedly aims to ensure her disclosures are acceptable to everyone and understands that inappropriate disclosures

may be detrimental, which reinforces Lannuttie and Strauman's (2006) argument that disclosures must be suitable. Furthermore, she judges the appropriateness of her disclosures, which suggests that this is a key issue in PAL research as well as education research (Mathews et al., 2006)

One item on the survey inquired whether Leaders revealed personal information. Our findings demonstrated uncertainty as 44% of respondents reported revealing personal information, whilst 44% did not; this suggests that Leaders have differing ideas on the appropriateness of certain topics. When asked about topics she would not disclose Emily said "personal information"; her explanation provided valuable insights:

"Personal information would be things about my family, how I'm feeling and also perhaps personal contact details..... I guess it is information which I feel they don't need to know about me"

Lucy responded in a similar manner:

"I wouldn't tell them about my family or the way I'm feeling, that is too personal to tell a group of people I don't know very well but I'm sure some other Leaders would disclose that information."

In addition to family matters and personal feelings, it would seem that Leaders' weekend activities are also deemed too personal and thus inappropriate. Only 30% of respondents said they would reveal this information. Lucy agreed with the majority of respondents commenting:

"It's never comes up in our sessions...there isn't a need and might be a waste of time."

Our interviewees appear to have clear ideas about which topics are appropriate, but it seems that may not necessarily be the case for all our Leaders. This reinforces the importance of understanding the appropriate use of self disclosure in PAL, not only to ensure that sessions are effective but also avoid any uncertainty and anxiety that

might be experienced by the Leaders. Appropriateness is also linked to our final theme, boundaries.

Boundaries

Derlega et al. (1993) suggested that people often have two competing needs that must be balanced when disclosing, the need to share personal information and the need to preserve a sense of privacy. As Lucy stressed:

“We have a responsibility to have boundaries and I think it’s important to build the respect of my students.”

This strengthens the contention that Leaders are keen to gain respect from their students (Ashwin 1994 cited in Rust and Wallace, 1994). Yet the PAL Leader-student relationship inevitably differs from a teacher-student relationship, as Emily noted:

“It’s murky ground because you’re not their friend but you’re not their tutor. Once my students found out I was getting paid for it something changed ... now they definitely place a responsibility on me to help them.”

Emily describes the ambiguity of the PAL Leader role and how students can mistakenly believe that the role is similar to that of a teacher. Lucy explains how she sets herself apart from the group in order to cope with the uncertainty of the role:

“If I keep an air of mystery about me then I feel more comfortable in my role as a Leader. If my group knew everything about me I’d feel that any authority I do have in the sessions would be lost.”

This suggests that PAL Leaders have similar factors affecting their level of self disclosure as teachers, reinforcing Hargie’s (1994) contention that the need for authority affects the amount of disclosure flowing from high status to low status individuals. Despite ostensibly being amongst their peers it seems PAL Leaders restrict their disclosures, to demarcate their role. As Emily observes:

“It is a job that I’m paid to do, so I feel that I have a responsibility and should be professional.”

Therefore it appears that keeping some distance between themselves and the students allows them to maintain their Leadership role. Clearly the PAL Leader role is challenging, as there is potential for boundaries to be blurred in this context; however it seems that our interviewees negotiate their role in a professional manner.

Emily illustrates how she deals with the complexity of her role, as her boundaries within sessions are flexible:

“I have boundaries about things I will and won’t say about myself. The boundaries I have probably change depending on the student. The people who attend my sessions regularly, I have had the chance to build up more of a rapport with them so I think I’d probably reveal more about myself to them as I trust them.”

We can see here that Emily is clearly selective in her disclosures, underlining the point made by Mathews et al. (2006) that individuals make choices about what they reveal. We also observed that disclosure is built on two way trust; not only does self disclosure help build a trusting environment (Goldstein and Benassi, 1994), but trust also needs to be built in order for Emily to feel comfortable self disclosing.

Implications for our Future Practice

Previous research suggests that sessions are most effective and successful when instructor self disclosure is evident (Devries, 1997, cited in De Lisi, 2002). The results of the survey and the comments made during the qualitative interviews support this proposal and confirm that sharing university experiences is a key feature of PAL at our institution.

However, it is clear that, despite a desire to be open, the setting and the relationship our Leaders have with their students determines the content and amount of disclosure within their PAL sessions. Overall our findings demonstrate there are similarities between the disclosures of PAL Leaders

and of teachers, as the content in both cases relate to 'suitable' subjects, which have a purpose (Lannuttie and Strauman, 2006). Moreover, the importance placed upon the 'appropriateness' of disclosure content, indicates that Leaders should be aware that when disclosure is suitable it provides support (Hendrick, 1988), improves the quality and clarity of class discussion and encourages participation (Downs et al., 1988; Wambach and Brothen, 1997). It seems that appropriate disclosure is just as important for our PAL Leaders as it is for teachers. This suggests that self disclosure should be an integral part of our training and problems are likely to occur if we neglect it.

An unexpected finding is that the payment of our Leaders could have an impact on the relationship developed between the Leaders and the students. In some institutions Leaders are paid, whilst in others they are volunteers. We need to reflect on whether the paid aspect of the job acts as a barrier for Leaders' freedom in their self disclosure, as it is claimed that an informal, relaxed environment ensures productive sessions (Hendrick, 1988; Cayanus, 2004). However, we fear there is a danger that if the role is not formalised and perceived as professional, an overly casual approach may be adopted which might blur the distinction between Leader and student.

Overall, our data suggest that self disclosure is a rich source of PAL Leader-student communication, just as it is in student-teacher communication (Fusani, 1994). Our interviewees were clearly aware of its importance in the relationship building process, which is claimed to produce positive effects in the classroom (Downs et al., 1988). It is evident that self disclosure is an integral part of the PAL Leader role, and it seems that Leaders regulate their disclosures to ensure they are 'appropriate, perceived as honest, positive and intentional' (Lannuttie and Strauman, 2006, p. 95). In order to maintain the quality of the scheme, we need to ensure that all of our Leaders are confident in using self disclosure. Therefore, exercises such as role play, as well as discussions about the appropriateness of specific topics, should be included in the training we deliver.

By training Leaders effectively to ensure they feel confident

disclosing and, most importantly, recognise how to disclose appropriately, future PAL Leaders will ensure that their communication is valuable to their students (Ashwin, 1994, cited in Rust and Wallace, 1994) and potentially enhances the first year experience (Packman and Miller, 2000) at our university.

CONCLUSION

To date the majority of PAL research has provided a broad overview of the scheme, examining its benefits and applauding its use. Whilst there is some previous evidence to suggest that students benefit from Leaders' disclosures of their experiences at Bournemouth university (Capstick et al., 2004), this study provides much greater insight into this type of interaction in our PAL sessions. We believe it is vital that we consider self disclosure as a discrete topic in our training to ensure that our PAL Leaders develop this important skill as they negotiate such a challenging role.

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